MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

This information seemed to cause him much pleasure

MELISSA ACROSS-THE-FENCE

BY

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN
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ILLUSTRATED BY
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MELISSA-ACROSS-THE FENCE

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE IN THE NEXT STREET

IT was a very grand house indeed, the house in the next street. Melissa spent much time staring at it out of the back window. Once in a while she would walk around to the next street and stare at it from the opposite sidewalk, but this was less interesting. By far the most enticing view of it was from the rear. Therefore Melissa was a great deal at her own back window.

As has been said, it was a very grand house, a great square brownstone house, and stood in a large plot of ground. In

the front was a spacious porch, several bright flower-beds, and two magnolia-trees; but in the rear, a lawn ran right back to the fence broken only by a narrow gravel walk, and with a stone fountain directly in the middle. In the spring and summer water bubbled up in the fountain-basin in jets of flying spray. On a windy day it swayed back and forth like a misty cloud. In winter the fountain was always dry.

Melissa would sit for hours in the back window of her tiny home on Cary Street and watch the fountain. She liked also to watch the sunlight on the smoothly kept lawn and the sparrows and starlings that dotted its velvety carpet. But best of all was the fountain. In the spring she would walk around to Pierpont Street to see the magnolia-trees in bloom and the bright flower-beds in front of the house, but she always returned to look at the fountain. That was the main thing. And next to the misty, bubbling water, Me-

lissa loved the stone statue of the pretty child standing in the middle of it, around whose dimpled feet the water played.

But there was one strange thing about the house that puzzled Melissa: Nobody ever seemed to live in it. A caretaker came at certain stated times all the year round. He looked after the grounds and the house, evidently keeping both in good order. Once in a long while he would open all the windows and let in air and sunshine for part of a day; then all would be shut tight again.

Melissa wondered and wondered where the people who owned it could be and why they did n't come to live in so lovely a place. Once she asked her mother, only to be told a little indifferently that she (her mother) had n't the least idea, and that Melissa must go and play and not ask foolish questions. So Melissa did n't ask any more.

But just the same she kept on wondering, and also wishing that once in a while

she might go and play on the pretty green lawn and dabble her hands in the fountain. This, of course, was out of the question. A high board fence ran around three sides of the grounds, so high that, in her own tiny back yard, Melissa could n't even see the big house. On the front was an equally high iron railing. The only place from which to see the fountain and lawn was her own back window, and with this view Melissa had to be content. Then one day a strange thing happened.

It was a hot Saturday morning in May. Melissa had brought a couple of books and her only doll, rather the worse for wear, to her favorite seat by the window. At a table near by, her mother, who made baby-clothes for a living, was cutting out a tiny flannel jacket. The room was their dining-room, kitchen, and parlor all in one. It was a big room, with a pleasant, sunny outlook over the lawn. They had only one other room in their little home, the one

in front, where they slept. But its windows looked out only on the hot, noisy street, and therefore they spent most of their time in the pleasant back room.

"Look! look, Mother!" cried Melissa, suddenly glancing over toward the great house. But her mother had her mouth full of pins, and had come to the difficult task of fastening the pieces of the tiny jacket together. She only smiled and shook her head, and mumbled something through the pins that sounded like, "Don't bother me just now, dear!" Therefore Melissa gave up trying to interest her, and just watched the strange, new events across the fence with breathless attention.

In the first place, the caretaker came out of the back door, followed by two women in scrubbing-aprons and dusting-caps. One carried a broom, the other a pail and a mop. The caretaker talked excitedly in a low voice and did much pointing and waving of his arms and giving of direc-

tions. The women said nothing, but presently went to work.

And all that day the work went on, while Melissa watched at her window, thrilled with excitement. Never before had she seen such window-washing, scrubbing, dusting, and polishing in the grand shut-up house as was being accomplished that warm May day. Something must surely be going to happen. And when, before night, lace curtains, very beautiful ones, appeared at the windows, and the shutters were not shut, but left, as never before, open and cheerful, Melissa clapped her hands and cried:

"They 're coming to live there at last! I *know* it!"

"Who?" asked her mother, the jacket being now finished and her mind at leisure. She was putting the supper on the table.

"Why, I don't know," said Melissa. "Whoever owns the big house, I s'pose." Her mother glanced out of the window, indifferently. It was plain that the inhabi-

tants of the big house did not greatly interest her.

"Well, they probably won't stay long in the city this hot weather," she remarked. "Come to your supper, Melissa."

But Melissa had little appetite, and she could scarcely sleep that night, so intense was her excitement. The great house was going to be occupied at last. Perhaps there would be children who would run about the lawn and play in the fountain. Melissa hoped there *would* be, lots of them! She was a lonely little girl and had really no playmates. The children in her own street were older than herself and rather rough and noisy. Melissa's mother, who was very quiet and gentle, did not like her little daughter to be with them. Therefore Melissa, when she was not in school, spent most of her time in the parlor-dining-room-kitchen of their tiny home.

But she dearly loved children, and she hoped with all her heart to see at least half a dozen of them romping about the foun-

tain in the near future. She also hoped there would be some rollicking dogs and a kitten or two and—

At this point, however, Melissa at last fell asleep and dreamed that a whole boarding-school of children had moved into the big house and were roving about the lawn. They had just beckoned her to come and join them when she heard her mother calling:

"Come! come, Melissa! Are you never going to get up? Breakfast is on the table, and you 're still abed." And, as Melissa crawled sleepily out of bed, she murmured half to herself:

"Oh, I wish it *were* going to be a boarding-school!"

"Whatever is the child talking about?" exclaimed her mother.

CHAPTER II

IN THE BAY-WINDOW

BUT it was *not* going to be a boarding-school. That fact became very plain during the next few days. Neither, apparently, were there any children, or any dogs, or even a kitten. Once in a while a neat, black-clad, white-capped, and aproned maid stepped out of the back door; sometimes, also, a man in a strange suit adorned with many buttons like a uniform. Melissa concluded that they must be servants. Figures could be seen passing the windows occasionally, but they never stopped long enough to be observed clearly.

Melissa was greatly disappointed. Where were all the lovely children she had hoped to see? There did n't appear to be

even one. And she had watched faithfully every moment of time when she was n't either in school or abed. More than that, the people in the big house never seemed to come to the windows. Only once, in the bay-window directly opposite where she was sitting, Melissa caught a glimpse of a pretty young woman all in white, with a strange white cap on her head. This young woman parted the lace curtains, glanced all about the lawn and up at the clouds (it was pouring rain), then shook her head and turned away, dropping the curtains behind her.

During the next two weeks Melissa made several trips around to Pierpont Street to look at the newly inhabited house from the front; but there was no more satisfaction to be gained from this view than from the other. The only time she saw any one at all was when a great shining automobile stopped in front of the house. Out of it jumped a tall bearded man with a black bag. He disappeared up the front

steps, and the door was opened for him by the man in the buttoned uniform. That was all. Melissa thought he must be the owner, but she could n't be sure.

So matters stood till a certain Monday, the one which began the third week after the house was opened. Melissa had just come in from school, washed her face and hands, eaten a piece of cake, collected her favorite books, and taken her seat by the window. Her mother was out, taking a number of finished baby-clothes to the store where she sold them.

Melissa opened her book to the page where she had left off the day before; then, as was her habit, she glanced up for a long, searching look at the big house. Then she dropped her book, clasped her hands on the sill in front of her, and gazed long and hard at the bay-window directly opposite, the one where she had once seen the young woman in white.

The young woman was there again, but she was not alone. Melissa could see ev-

erything very plainly because the lace curtains were drawn back to allow the sun to stream in freely. In the center of the window was a chair piled full of cushions, pillows, and shawls, and in the midst of all these there sat a little figure all swathed in bandages, even around its face and head. The young woman in white stood beside it, with her fingers on one of its wrists.

"It 's a child! It 's a child!" said Melissa, ecstatically. "But, oh! what can be the matter with the poor thing? It 's so wrapped up in bandages and things that I can't even tell whether it 's a boy or a girl. And that must be a trained nurse, that young lady in white. He, she—I mean *it* —must be feeling a little better to be allowed to sit up in the window. I s'pose it 's been in bed all this time."

At this moment the nurse brought something in a glass and held it to the little figure's lips. Then she brought a fan and a book and sat reading aloud and fanning for several minutes. And all the time Me-

lissa watched the scene, too absorbed to move. At last the nurse shut her book, drew the chair back from the window, dropped the curtains, and events were over for the day.

Melissa went to bed that night in a state of greater excitement than ever. There *was* a child, then, after all; but was it a boy or a girl? How old could it be? And, above all, what had happened to it? An accident of some kind, plainly, for Melissa could think of no sickness that would cause it to be so swathed in bandages and so motionless. She felt as if she would give almost anything she owned to know the answer to these questions. But she could think of no one to ask, not even her mother, and so she had to be content with guessing.

The next day was cloudy and dull. Melissa raced home from school at the stroke of three and spent the entire afternoon at the window; but no small bandaged figure appeared there that day.

"I guess it was n't sunny enough," Melissa told herself. "And there was a cold wind blowing, too. I 'm sure it 'll be there to-morrow if the day 's nice." So she tried to comfort herself. All the same she was bitterly disappointed.

But the next day was beautiful, and on her return from school there sat the bandaged figure in the bay-window, with the faithful nurse beside it. That day Melissa caught a glimpse of a patch of bright hair, curly and golden, where one of the bandages had been set differently about the head.

"Oh, it 's got *lovely* hair!" she said aloud. "I 'm glad it 's got such pretty hair—just like a big doll I saw once in a store window, only prettier." Her mother was out again, and when Melissa was alone, she often talked to herself. Now she went right on:

"Perhaps every day or so there 'll be something different about the bandages and things, and then, by and by, I 'll be

able to tell just what it is. Then maybe it 'll get so well it can run about the garden, and I 'll have a chance to see it much better. Perhaps sometime it 'll wave to me, and perhaps—" But here the nurse arose and drew the curtains and ended Melissa's dreams for another day.

After that, for a whole week, there was no special change. Every sunny day the little invalid was placed in the window at about the same time, and never for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. Then one afternoon Melissa noticed a difference. There was one bandage less about the head, and more curly hair could be seen. In another two days a pair of hands, free from bandages, appeared on the silken comfortable wrapped about the figure. The invalid seemed much interested in these hands, looked at them very often and tried to wriggle the fingers. When it did that the nurse laughed, shook her head, and covered them with her own.

After that it rained for five days in suc-

cession, and Melissa, though she watched faithfully, had not so much as one glimpse of the little bandaged figure that had come to mean so much to her. Every morning when she got up she would rush to the window to see the weather, and every morning she would turn away with a disgusted sigh.

"Raining again!" she would say.

On the sixth day it was still raining, but at two in the afternoon the clouds broke away, and the sun came gloriously out. Melissa danced home from school, scarcely touching the pavement with her feet. She did not even stop to wash her face and eat her daily portion of cake. Instead she tossed her books on a chair and flew to the window, not even heeding her mother's protest:

"Why, Melissa! How *could* you! your books are right on my sewing."

The bay-window opposite was wide open. The curtains were all pulled aside. A figure sat in the big chair as usual, but

with a wonderful difference. It was no longer swathed in bandages, not even in *one*. It still sat among many pillows and cushions, but it was fully dressed, except for the prettiest figured-silk dressing-gown in the world, which it wore over its other clothes.

Melissa gave just one look, and then she uttered a cry which made her mother turn and stare at her in amazement.

"Why," she exclaimed, fairly stuttering in her excitement, "it 's—a—b—*boy!*"

CHAPTER III

THE BOY IN THE BIG HOUSE

"WELL, I can't think what you find so extraordinary in that," exclaimed Melissa's mother, and she also came to look out of the window. "What if it *is* a boy?"

"But don't you see," explained Melissa, "I did n't know till just now what it—I mean *he*—was, he was all wrapped up in bandages and things for so long. Did n't you notice?"

"No, I did n't notice," said her mother, turning away. "I have n't any time to be looking out of the window, dearie. If the little fellow has been sick, I 'm glad he 's better." And with this her interest in the whole affair vanished.

But Melissa's interest did not vanish.

On the contrary, it grew ten times as great. And when she had rushed through the washing of her face and hands, she took her cake and sat down at the window in order that she might not lose a moment of the newest wonder.

Yes, it was a boy and a very beautiful boy at that. Melissa could see that even at a distance. He had a mop of curly yellow hair, as she had already guessed, and bright eyes. Their color she was too far away to distinguish. But he was very pale, and he scarcely moved at all during the whole time he sat there. The white-capped nurse came and sat by him awhile, but she did not read aloud as usual. Instead, she laid the book on his knees, and he turned a page once in a long while in a slow, feeble way, as if it hurt him to move his hands. He sat by the window that day for nearly an hour, and then the nurse wheeled him away. Melissa gave a litttle sigh of content as he disappeared.

"He 's getting lots better," she told her-

self. "Soon he will be stronger, and some day perhaps they 'll take him down-stairs and let him sit outdoors."

The days passed, and it was evident that the boy *was* growing stronger. He held his book and turned the leaves more firmly. He moved his hands about with greater freedom, and even whittled at things with a penknife. Later he had a small table in front of him on which appeared mechanical toys and boyish tools of various kinds. In these he took great interest for a time, and then grew plainly tired of them and did not touch them any more. Once he had a large sheet of white paper on the table before him, and seemed to be making a drawing of some kind on it.

But he did not go down-stairs or sit out on the sunny lawn. Melissa wondered about that. Also she wondered much about what could possibly have happened to him to make him ill for so long a time. She felt as if she would give anything to call across and ask him; but this she did

not dare to do, nor did she like to seem to watch him in that way. She often wondered if he noticed her sitting daily in her window, or had any idea how much interest she took in his affairs.

The nurse seemed to be with him less often now, though Melissa sometimes saw her flitting about in the room behind him. But once another person came and sat all the afternoon by the boy, reading and talking to him, with her hand in his. This was a very beautiful lady in wonderful, shimmery clothes. Melissa immediately guessed her to be his mother. She knew it by the lovely curling, golden hair so like his and by the sweet understanding way she seemed to have with him.

"But I wonder why she is n't with him all the time," thought Melissa. "I wonder what keeps her away. And he seems so happy with her, too."

But the lady did not come again, and the little lad, as time passed, seemed to grow very restless and weary of being con-

fined to his chair. He would wriggle about in it, take up a book, and throw it aside again after a moment, play with his toys and tools for five minutes, then turn away from them also. The nurse did her best to amuse him, but it was plain that often she did not succeed very well. Several times Melissa thought she heard him tell her to "Go away!" in rather a loud, fretful voice.

"Poor little boy!" she thought. "How awfully, *awfully* tired he must be of sitting there all the time! I wish I could do something to amuse him. I wish I *dared*."

But she never did dare. She was a nicely brought up little girl and had been taught by her mother that she must never intrude herself on people, especially if she did not know them. One day, however, something happened that made her forget even this well-drilled lesson in manners.

It was half-past three of a hot June afternoon, and she had just taken her seat at the window. The boy was sitting op-

posite as usual, a table in front of him on which was a large sheet of drawing-paper. But he was not drawing. He sat with his eyes fixed on nothing, staring straight ahead of him, and the corners of his mouth drooped in the most forlorn manner in the world. It made Melissa's heart ache to watch him.

All at once she was startled to see him place his arms on the table and lean his head on them; then his shoulders began to shake. Melissa knew as well as if she were standing by his side that he was sobbing as if his heart would break. It seemed to her as if she could not look at so sad a sight, as if she had no right to. She turned her head away, and scarcely knew that the tears were standing in her own eyes. When she turned back, he was sitting up again, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief, which he presently stuffed into his pocket. Then he began to stare vacantly out of the window again.

Melissa never realized what she was do-

ing. In fact, she did n't stop to think of it at all. So absorbed was she in sympathy for the little sick lad who seemed to be in trouble that she leaned out of the window and waved a friendly hand to him and smiled.

For a moment he did not seem to see; then his eye caught the signaling hand and the friendly little smile behind it. In an instant he sat up straight, an eager look came into his pale face, and he waved his own hand frantically in return. It was then that Melissa suddenly realized what she had done without thinking, and she sank back shyly into her chair.

"Oh, I s'pose I ought n't; but he seemed so sad," she thought, "and then so glad I waved to him! I hope mother won't mind." All this time the boy seemed to be rummaging about, trying to find something he had lost or dropped. Melissa watched him furtively. Then at last he found it on the floor near his chair. It was evidently a pencil, and with it he went

to work, hard and rapidly, on the big sheet of paper before him.

Melissa watched him and wondered. What could he be doing? And why was he suddenly so eager to draw just because she had waved to him? For the life of her she could n't see any reason; but she was soon to know.

A few moments later the boy dropped his pencil and held the paper straight up, facing her. On it he had printed some words in letters nearly a foot high. And Melissa, to her great astonishment, read thereon this message:

"I AM SO LONESOME."

CHAPTER IV

WITH PENCIL AND CHALK

MELISSA read the sentence three times; then it dawned on her that the boy was trying to *talk* to her across the wide space that separated them. She nodded her head at him several times, and he lowered the paper. And then it dawned on her further that he would probably expect an answer. What was she to do?

It happened that she was alone again that afternoon, as she frequently was. She had no large sheet of paper, and a small one would never do. For a moment she thought of using a sheet of her mother's nice wrapping-paper; but as she realized that her mother could not afford to spare it, she gave that up. All at once she

thought of her toy blackboard. With a little excited cry, she ran to get it and a piece of chalk. On it she managed to print in very large white letters:

"I AM VERY SORRY."

This she held to the window, and peeped over the top to see its effect on the boy.

He peered at it a long time, shading his eyes with his hands. Then he turned and seemed to call to some one in the room back of him. In a short time the man with many buttons on his coat appeared with several sheets of white paper and something else, which he laid on the boy's knee. The boy raised this "something" to his eyes, and Melissa beheld him staring across at her blackboard through what seemed to be a large pair of opera-glasses. These he presently put aside and began with his pencil to work on another message.

Melissa waited in breathless excitement. This was better fun than anything she had

ever known before. She wondered and wondered what he was going to say next, but she had not long to wait. In another moment he held up the paper, on which was printed:

"LET'S BE FRIENDS."

Melissa was even more excited. This wonderful boy in the grand house wanted to be friends with *her*—Melissa! She cleaned the blackboard with her eraser and wrote:

"ALL RIGHT."

This she held to the window, and he examined it with the glasses. Then he went to work again, and Melissa read a moment later:

"I AM VICTOR BONNER."

"Now, that's nice," she thought. "I know his name. I always hate to think of him as just 'the boy.'" And on her own blackboard she printed:

"I AM MELISSA MAPES."

This information seemed to cause him pleasure, for he waved his hand and made her a military salute.

"Just like we salute the flag in school," thought Melissa, proudly. But while she was thinking this, he was working again. The next sheet displayed two sentences:

"I AM TWELVE.
HOW OLD ARE YOU?"

And Melissa replied:

"I AM TEN.
HAVE YOU BEEN VERY SICK?"

The boy took a long time to answer this, and spoiled two sheets of paper before he made one that suited him. That one read:

"BAD ACCIDENT.
LAUNCH BLEW UP."

Melissa was puzzled. She actually did n't know what a launch was, never having seen or even heard of one before. She did n't exactly know how to answer, so she printed:

"I AM SORRY.
WHAT IS A LAUNCH?"

The boy laughed when he read it, and his answering paper explained:

"LITTLE BOAT.
RUN BY STEAM.
ENGINE EXPLODED."

This was better. Melissa felt that at last she could imagine a reason for all the bandages. So she wrote next:

"DID IT HURT YOU MUCH?"

Again he was a long time answering, and finally held up two papers containing a whole list of "hurts." On one was printed:

"SKIN BURNED OFF.
HAIR SINGED.
LEG BROKEN."

And on the other:

"RIB BROKEN.
EYES HURT.
ALL RIGHT NOW."

"Good gracious!" thought Melissa, "what a lot to have the matter with one! No wonder it took so long to get well." But one thing still puzzled her, so she printed on her board:

"WHY DON'T YOU GO OUT?"

The boy looked rather solemn when he read that, and replied:

"CAN'T. SOMETHING THE MATTER WITH MY HEART."

"Oh," thought Melissa, "I *wish* I had n't asked that! It made him feel bad. I 'll say something different now." So she printed:

"I LIKE YOUR LAWN AND FOUNTAIN."

The boy laughed again at that, and answered:

"I DON'T.
NOT HALF AS NICE AS IDLEHOURS."

Here was another puzzle. Melissa could n't imagine what he meant by that last sentence. So she wrote:

"WHAT IS IDLEHOURS?"

And the boy quickly replied:

"MY OTHER HOME IN THE COUNTRY."

Then Melissa knew the answer to a lot of things she had often puzzled about. The boy had another home, then, where he had probably always lived till now. Doubtless it was in some beautiful country place, and that was where his accident had happened. She wisely guessed that he had been brought here so that he could be near the doctors and get well more quickly. While she was thinking all this over, he wrote again:

"I HATE THIS HOUSE."

This was very astonishing to Melissa. That any one could *hate* such a big, beautiful place was something she simply could not understand. She replied:

"I THINK IT IS A LOVELY HOUSE."

The boy quickly answered:

"IT'S HORRID.
YOU SHOULD SEE IDLEHOURS."

"Well," thought Melissa, "Idlehours must be perfectly wonderful if he thinks this so horrid." But there was something else she wanted to ask. And so she wrote next:

"WHY DO YOU LOOK THROUGH THOSE OPERA GLASSES?"

He answered on two sheets of paper:

"CAN'T SEE WELL YET FAR OFF.
THEY ARE MARINE GLASSES.
USE THEM ON BOATS."

"He must be awfully fond of boats," thought Melissa. "He is always talking about them. I guess Idlehours must be near the water." After thinking a long while, she wrote back:

"I WENT ON A BOAT ONCE.
UP THE HUDSON."

The boy seemed about to reply to this when there was a sudden commotion be-

hind him, and the nurse in white appeared. After a good deal of talk between them, he wrote and held up this message:

"GOT TO GO BACK TO BED.
GOOD NIGHT."

The nurse laughed aloud as he held it up. Melissa printed "GOOD NIGHT" on her blackboard, they waved to each other again, and the boy was wheeled away out of sight.

"Why, Melissa," exclaimed her mother, who came in just at that instant, "whatever are you doing with that blackboard?" Melissa tried to explain it all, and Mrs. Mapes listened, rather amazed and not at all sure that she approved till Melissa got to the part about poor little Victor's accident and "something the matter with his heart." Then all her disapproval vanished.

"Poor little laddie!" she said at last. "I 'm glad you 've managed to amuse him." But as she was setting the table

for supper she murmured many times to herself:

"Well, I *never!* If Melissa is n't the strangest child!"

CHAPTER V

THE FRIENDSHIP GROWS

IT seemed to Melissa ages and ages till three o'clock next day, so wild was she to get home and begin exchanging messages with the little invalid boy in the big house. Over and over she wondered what new thing he would have to say, and in her own mind she was treasuring up dozens of questions that she wanted to ask. Only one thing worried her, the amount of large sheets of drawing-paper he had used in talking to her.

"If he keeps on like that, they 'll soon be gone," she thought. "And they cost a lot, too. And then perhaps he won't talk any more."

What was her surprise, then, on rushing to the window in the afternoon, to be-

hold him with a great new blackboard standing by his chair. As soon as he saw her, he waved frantically and chalked in big letters on his board:

"I MADE THEM GET ME ONE, TOO."

Melissa wondered who "them" could be, but concluded that he meant the servants. And she wondered still more where his mother was, and why he did n't ask *her* to get it. But she quickly dragged her own board to the window and wrote:

"THAT IS FINE.
HOW ARE YOU TO-DAY?"

Up went the boy's marine glasses, and then he answered:

"BETTER.
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL DAY?"

Melissa replied quickly:

"AT SCHOOL.
THIS IS THE LAST WEEK."

The boy looked pleased and wrote:

"HURRAH.
AFTER THAT WE WILL TALK ALL DAY."

From this Melissa guessed that he must now spend much more of his time sitting in the window. In return she informed him:

"I AM GOING TO BE PROMOTED."

He was a long time studying that through his glasses, and finally inquired:

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?"

Melissa was amazed. That any child of twelve should not know what "promoted" meant was something she could scarcely understand. She tried to explain:

"PUT IN A HIGHER CLASS."

He seemed to understand that better, and answered:

"I NEVER WENT TO SCHOOL."

Melissa was more and more astonished. She demanded:

"THEN HOW DID YOU LEARN THINGS?"

"PRIVATE TUTOR,"

was his reply, and it was now Melissa's turn to ask:

"WHAT IS THAT?"

He smiled a little as he printed:

"TEACHER AT HOME.
A MAN."

So here at last was the explanation. Still, Melissa wondered where his mother could be, and why she did n't teach her little son herself. While she was thinking it over, he wrote:

"I LIKE YOUR NAME,
MELISSA."

And she promptly demanded:

"WHY?"

He thought a long while over that, and finally wrote:

"BECAUSE IT SOUNDS DIFFERENT."

"Different from what?" wondered Melissa. But before she could ask, he had rubbed that out and printed:

"DO YOU KNOW WHAT I CALL YOU?"

She shook her head in answer, and he replied:

"MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE."

This was such an unusual idea that Melissa laughed and laughed, and Victor laughed, too, in sympathy. Then she wrote:

"BUT THAT ISN'T MY NAME."

And he only replied:

"I DON'T CARE.
I LIKE IT BEST."

All she could think of in answer to this was:

"IT SOUNDS LIKE AN INDIAN NAME."

Her answer seemed to make him grow very much excited, and he hurriedly scribbled:

"IT IS.
THAT'S WHY I LIKE IT.
DO YOU EVER PLAY INDIANS?"

This amused the gentle little Melissa more than anything yet.

"NO. NEVER.
DO YOU?"

She asked him, and he replied:

"A WHOLE LOT."

And when she had read it, he went on:

"I AM BIG CHIEF EAGLE-FEATHER."

Before she could answer even this he continued:

"LET'S PLAY INDIANS SOMETIME."

Melissa replied:

"ALL RIGHT,"

though she was really a good deal puzzled as to how they were going to play Indian with only a couple of blackboards to talk by. The question of Indians being settled, however, Victor appeared to have others to ask.

"DO YOU LIVE IN THAT WHOLE
LITTLE HOUSE?"

he printed next.

"NO. ONLY ON THE TOP FLOOR,"

was her reply.
And to his next question:

"WHO LIVES DOWN-STAIRS?"

she answered:

"OLD MR. LETOUR.
HE IS A SHOEMAKER.
HE PLAYS THE FLUTE."

Victor hurriedly replied to that:

"I HEARD HIM LAST NIGHT.
I LIKE IT."

Before she could think what to say next, Victor inquired:

"WHO DO YOU LIVE WITH?"

Melissa printed:

"MY MOTHER.
NO ONE ELSE."

The boy answered:

"I SAW HER ONCE AT THE
WINDOW.
I LIKE HER."

Somehow this pleased Melissa more than anything he had said yet. And she smiled at her mother, who was sitting near, as she answered:

"I AM SO GLAD."

But her mother did not notice, because she was very busy crocheting a baby's tiny bootee.

Victor next imparted to Melissa another piece of news:

"MY NURSE'S NAME IS MISS BLAKE.
SHE IS VERY NICE."

Melissa replied:

"SHE LOOKS VERY KIND AND
PRETTY."

He then added:

"SHE GOES OUT EVERY AFTER-
NOON."

Melissa printed:

"THEN YOU MUST BE LONELY."

And Victor answered:

"NOT SINCE I CAN TALK TO YOU."

She could have laughed aloud with pleasure. But there was something else she wanted to ask, so she printed very large:

"DO YOU LIKE TO READ BOOKS?"

When he had nodded a vigorous assent, she went on:

"I LIKE MISS ALCOTT'S.
WHAT KIND DO YOU LIKE?"

But she was a little disappointed when he wrote:

"ONLY ONES ABOUT INDIANS AND BOATS."

Afterward, however, she thought, "Why, of course he likes those best. That 's because he 's a boy."

But the afternoon was drawing to a close, and though they had not exchanged very many messages, it took a long time to print them. Melissa saw Miss Blake come into the room, say something to the boy, and could almost *hear* him exclaim:

"Just a little longer, Miss Blake—*please!*" Then she saw the nurse smile, and walk away out of sight; but she knew the conversation was very near an end for that day. Now there was one question that Melissa had longed to ask her new friend above all others—a question that had puzzled her very much all along, and she felt that she could not let another day go by without knowing the answer. So

while the boy was drinking a glass of milk that his nurse had handed him she printed:

"IS YOUR MOTHER COMING HOME SOON?"

Little Victor put down his empty glass, raised his marine glasses to his eyes, and read this new question. Unlike his usual manner, however, he did not begin to answer it at once, but sat thinking awhile, staring out across the lawn at nothing. At last he took his chalk and wrote slowly just four words:

"I HAVE N'T ANY MOTHER."

When Melissa read that she could have cried with vexation to think how thoughtless she had been in asking him such a question. She might have known his mother was no longer living, else she would have seen her always near her boy. It had plainly made him feel very bad indeed. What *could* she say after that?

There was only one thing she could think of, and this she wrote:

"AND I HAVE N'T ANY FATHER.
NOT FOR FIVE YEARS."

When the boy had read that, he answered:

"I HAVE A FATHER AND AN AUNT.
DAD IS FINE.
SO IS AUNT VIRGINIA."

But Miss Blake now came over to his side, and there was plainly no putting her off any longer. So he wrote as he had the day before:

"MUST GO BACK TO BED NOW.
GOOD NIGHT."

And when Melissa had printed

"GOOD NIGHT,"

both he and Miss Blake waved to her and disappeared from the window.

But long after Melissa herself had gone to bed that night she lay thinking and

thinking over all the new things she had learned about the boy that day, and especially about the fact that he had no mother. And all of a sudden she sat right up in bed, struck by a thought that had not occurred to her before. The lovely lady in the shimmery clothes that she had seen with him once must be his Aunt Virginia.

"Why, of course!" she exclaimed aloud. "Now I know."

"Lie down, Melissa," said her mother, sleepily. "Whatever is the matter? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Oh, no," said Melissa and laughed, "but I think I 'm *going* to have some very nice ones."

CHAPTER VI

MORE TALK AND A CONCERT

"TELL ME HOW YOU GOT HURT"

was the first thing Melissa printed on her blackboard next day. Till then they had been so busy getting acquainted that they had thought and said nothing much about this except what Victor had written the first day, and Melissa was very anxious to know.

Now that the subject was mentioned, Victor himself seemed no less anxious to tell her. But it was such a long story that he had to print it in a number of separate parts. First he informed her:

"DAD GAVE ME A LITTLE LAUNCH NAMED THE *SPRAY*."

At this, Melissa chalked on her board:

"THAT IS A PRETTY NAME."

He replied:

"YES.
I ALWAYS WENT OUT IN HER WITH
MR. JAMES."

Here Melissa asked:

"WHO IS HE?"

And Victor answered:

"MY TUTOR.
WE RAN THE *SPRAY* TOGETHER."

When he had erased this he went on:

"ONE DAY SOMETHING WENT
WRONG WITH THE ENGINE."

Melissa at once demanded:

"WHAT?"

But he only replied:

"I DON'T KNOW.
MR. JAMES WAS RUNNING IT."

He continued:

"THERE CAME AN AWFUL *BANG*.

Then:

"I WENT RIGHT UP IN THE AIR."

And:

"NEXT I KNEW I WAS FLOATING IN THE WATER."

Here Melissa wrote:

"THAT MUST HAVE BEEN AWFUL."

She was really quite horrified. Victor answered:

"IT WAS.
THEN THEY FISHED ME OUT."

And went on:

"AFTER THAT I DID N'T REMEMBER ANYTHING
FOR A LONG TIME."

Melissa now had another question to ask:

"HOW LONG?"

He thought a moment and then wrote:

"THEY SAID IT WAS THREE WEEKS."

"My!" exclaimed Melissa, "this is the worst thing I ever heard of!"

"WHAT NEXT?"

she printed excitedly. He continued:

"THEY KEPT ME IN COTTON AND OIL AND PLASTER AND BANDAGES."

Melissa's eyes were almost popping out of her head at this thrilling story. But he was not through yet, and went on:

"DAD FELT AWFUL.
I'M HIS ONLY CHILD."

"I should think he *would* feel awful!" thought Melissa.

"THEN THEY BROUGHT ME HERE,"

appeared on Victor's board,

"SO I COULD BE NEAR THE DOCTOR'S.
IDLEHOURS IS TOO FAR AWAY."

Melissa seized her own chalk.

"IS YOUR FATHER HERE NOW?"

she questioned.

"NO. HE HAD TO GO SOUTH WHEN I GOT BETTER,"

wrote Victor, and added:

"ON BUSINESS."

But another thought had come to Melissa.

"WHAT HAPPENED TO MR. JAMES?"

she demanded. Victor instantly replied:

"HE WAS HARD HIT TOO.
HE IS IN A HOSPITAL NOW."

And Melissa wrote:

"I HOPE HE WILL BE ALL RIGHT."

Victor assured her:

"HE IS MUCH BETTER.
NEARLY WELL."

Melissa now had a piece of advice to give, and she printed:

"DON'T EVER GO IN A LAUNCH AGAIN."

He laughed as he answered:

"I WON'T.
DAD IS GOING TO GIVE ME A CANOE."

And he added:

"THAT'S WHAT INDIANS USE, SO IT'S MUCH BETTER."

Having now heard all about the accident that had brought this pleasant boy close to her, Melissa thought of still another question she had always longed to ask, and printed:

"DO YOU LIKE DOGS?
I WONDER IF YOU HAVE ONE."

A new light came into the boy's face as he answered:

"I LOVE THEM.
I HAVE A BEAUTY."

To Melissa's query:

"WHERE IS HE?"

Victor replied:

"AT IDLEHOURS.
I MISS HIM AWFULLY."

Melissa next inquired:

"WHAT KIND OF A DOG IS HE?"

Victor answered:

"A CHOW.
YELLOW AND WHITE."

Melissa was thoroughly puzzled. She had never heard of that kind of dog, and somehow she did n't exactly like to confess it. So she let it pass, promising herself to discover in some other way. Then she asked:

"WHAT IS HIS NAME?"

To this Victor printed just one word in answer:

"BIM."

It struck Melissa as such a comical and unusual name that she laughed quite heart-

ily about it; but while she was laughing, Victor wrote something that made her sit up straight with interest:

"WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOR?"

She made haste to answer:

"YES, INDEED. WHAT?"

He replied in several separate parts:

"I DON'T SLEEP WELL NIGHTS.
LEG HURTS.
RIB, TOO."

Then:

"DO YOU KNOW MR. LETOUR
WELL? IS HE NICE?"

Melissa, wondering what on earth could be coming, wrote:

"YES. QUITE WELL.
HE IS VERY KIND."

This seemed to please Victor, and he went on:

"WHEN HE PLAYS THE FLUTE I
ALWAYS FEEL BETTER."

And added:

"WON'T YOU ASK HIM IN TO PLAY
TO-NIGHT?
IT MAKES ME GO TO SLEEP."

Melissa lost not a moment in replying:

"OF COURSE I WILL.
I KNOW HE WILL BE GLAD TO."

Then, after a second thought, she added:

"IF HE IS N'T TOO TIRED."

Victor answered:

"THANKS SO MUCH.
HERE IS MISS BLAKE.
SUPPOSE I 'VE GOT TO GO TO BED."

After the usual interchange of good nights, Melissa put her blackboard away and sat a long time thinking over all Victor had told her. And while she was waiting for her mother's return from the stores, she decided to go down and have a talk with Mr. Letour.

Mr. Letour was a shoemaker and had a tiny shop at the front, on the ground floor of the little house. But he never seemed to make any *new* shoes, for all his time appeared to be spent in repairing old ones. It is safe to say that almost every old shoe in the neighborhood had at some time passed through his hands.

He was a very kindly old man, with snow-white hair and great iron-rimmed spectacles. Besides mending shoes, he seemed to care only for the little flute that he played when not at work. But he worked so hard that he was often too tired for even that pleasure, and would only sit in his tiny back room, with folded hands, thinking, and thinking. When Melissa came into the shop he was working on a very dilapidated old shoe, and he did not stop working, only said:

"Sit down, little Melissa, and tell me how goes the day with you." Melissa sat down on the other end of his bench and before she knew it had begun eagerly to

"Yes, we have a concert tonight"

describe the poor little lad in the big house, and all his troubles, and how they exchanged messages, and how he longed to hear some music at night to make him sleep.

"Poor soul! poor soul!" murmured Mr. Letour, indistinctly, because he was holding the waxed thread in his mouth. "It is not always the rich that are happy. No, no. Nor comfortable, either. Their money cannot buy away the pain. Yes, I play to-night, though I am very tired. I play the fine music. We put the poor laddie to sleep."

"Oh, thank you!" said Melissa. "And I 'll listen, too. Mother and I both love your music."

"So? So?" exclaimed the pleased old man. "Yes, it is a good flute. Once I play very well, very well indeed, in a big orchestra. I was a young man then. Yes, we have a concert to-night." But Melissa had something else on her mind.

"Mr. Letour," she began hesitatingly,

"do you know anything about dogs—the different kinds, I mean?"

"Ah, yes. I love the dogs. Once I used to own many. I have now a whole book about them."

"Oh, good! Well, what is a Chow dog, then?"

"A Chow? He is a rare dog, a kind of Chinese dog. Costs a lot, very expensive; but very beautiful, too. See! I have a picture of him." And Mr. Letour rummaged out a big book from the shelf behind him, turned a few leaves, and showed Melissa a picture.

"Is he not beautiful? Yes?"

"Oh, lovely!" exclaimed Melissa. "Well, Mr. Letour, our Victor in the big house has a dog just like that."

"Then he should be one very happy boy," beamed Mr. Letour, closing the book.

Melissa lay long awake that night, listening to some of the loveliest music she had ever heard. Never before had she

realized what Mr. Letour could do with his flute when he was interested enough to give a real concert. And as she drowsed off into blissful slumber under its spell she whispered to herself:

"Oh, how I hope this is making little Victor happy and comfortable and *sleepy* to-night!"

CHAPTER VII

BIM

NEXT day, Victor's first message read:

"THE MUSIC WAS FINE.
I SLEPT WELL.
PLEASE THANK MR. LETOUR FOR
ME."

The two children told each other of many things that afternoon. Victor explained why his father had to be away so much, because of his business, and why he did n't see his Aunt Virginia oftener. She, it seemed, had gone on a short trip to Europe, but expected to return sometime during the coming month. Even then Victor did not think he would see her often, because she lived a long way off, and had many duties to which she must attend.

Melissa, on her part, told about herself and her mother—why they lived in this tiny house, and how hard her mother worked to make a living for them both. She explained that it had n't always been so. They had once lived in a nice, comfortable house in another part of the town, when she was a tiny girl, before her father died.

Then the boy told a great deal about his life at his father's beautiful country home, Idlehours, where he had always lived, how he had fished and swam and boated and played "Indian" all summer, and coasted, snowballed, and studied all winter, having his father with him as often as possible. And Melissa understood at last why it was that this great city house had not been used by its owner for so long.

All this and many other things they told each other, and the telling occupied several days. Each night good old Mr. Letour gave them a fine concert, never playing the same thing two nights in succession, and

Victor announced that he had n't slept so well for weeks past. Then one day he opened the afternoon's conversation with the sentence:

"LET 'S PLAY INDIANS."

Of course Melissa's first question was:

"HOW SHALL WE DO IT?"

But the boy evidently had it all planned out, for he only wrote:

"LIKE THIS.
LOOK."

Melissa looked and saw him pull from under his chair a crown of chicken-feathers and place it on his head. So odd did his yellow curls appear in this warlike head-dress that she could n't help smiling. Next he took a piece of red chalk and drew strange, broad lines on his cheeks and forehead, the effect of which was so startling that Melissa almost shrieked with laughter.

"YOU MUST N'T LAUGH,"

he warned her.

"THIS IS MY WAR PAINT."

After that, he wrapped a striped blanket about himself and informed her:

"NOW I AM BIG CHIEF EAGLE-FEATHER."

Melissa now inquired:

"BUT WHAT AM I TO DO?"

He had his answer ready for that:

"YOU ARE SQUAW MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE?
CAN'T YOU FIX UP A LITTLE?"

Melissa replied:

"BUT I HAVE N'T ANY FEATHERS.

He quickly informed her:

"SQUAWS DON'T WEAR FEATHERS."

Then Melissa, who happened to remem-

ber the picture of an Indian girl that she had once seen, wrote

"WAIT"

on her board, and disappeared into the bedroom. When she reappeared at the window she had her dark hair in two long braids hanging over her chest, and a narrow belt of her mother's fastened about her forehead. Besides that she had draped a bright red bed-quilt about her shoulders. So like a real little Indian did she look that the boy clapped his hands and printed:

"BULLY."

To her demand:

"WHAT NEXT?"

he replied:

"YOU BUILD A FIRE TO ROAST THE FISH I'M GOING TO CATCH."

Then he picked up a cane that lay near him, tied a string to it, and pretended to be

fishing out of the window. Melissa, catching the spirit of this play, made motions to imitate picking up wood, lighting a fire, blowing on it to make it higher, and cooking something in one of her mother's frying-pans. Next they pretended to eat the fish, and after that he ordered:

"NOW WE ARE GOING HUNTING."

From somewhere near his chair he picked up a toy bow and arrows, and aimed one straight at the stone child in the fountain. Melissa also pretended to aim an arrow. Presently he let his own fly. It missed the child, much to Melissa's relief, and landed harmlessly in the turf beyond. Immediately he wrote:

"I JUST KILLED A BUFFALO.
NOW WE WILL CUT IT UP."

Melissa cheerfully pretended to assist at the task.

So they played all the afternoon, and Victor assured her that it was the best

day's fun he'd had yet. Just before he said good night, however, he wrote:

"I HAVE A SURPRISE FOR YOU TO-MORROW."

He would not consent to tell her another thing about it, and Melissa passed an almost sleepless night, wondering what in the world it could be.

When she awoke next morning, it was to remember that she had two pleasant things to think about. One was that school was over for ten long weeks, the other, that Victor had a surprise for her; and as she hurried through the task of dressing, she was considering how soon she would discover what that surprise was. Not very soon, it appeared, for Victor did not come to his window till nearly noon. When at last Miss Blake had wheeled his chair into position, Melissa's first words were:

"TELL ME ABOUT THE SURPRISE."

Before the boy could answer, however, the lower door of the big house opened, and out rushed the most beautiful dog that Melissa had ever seen. He was not so large as a collie, though he looked a little like one, with his thick, fluffy, white-and-yellow coat and the plume-like tail curled over his back. His head was shaped more like an Eskimo dog's that Melissa had once seen a picture of, but, on the whole, he was the image of the Chow dog in old Mr. Letour's book. And while he raced round and round the lawn Victor wrote:

"THAT IS THE SURPRISE."
THAT'S BIM."

Melissa was amazed.

"BUT HOW DID HE GET HERE?"

she asked, for she had thought him far away at Idlehours.

"I SENT FOR HIM.
HE CAME IN A CRATE LAST NIGHT."

replied Victor. Then:

"YOU MADE ME THINK OF HAVING HIM HERE WHEN YOU ASKED ABOUT HIM."

Melissa could hardly take her eyes from the racing dog, but she managed to write:

"YOU MUST BE VERY HAPPY TO HAVE HIM HERE."

Victor assured her:

"I AM. WE ARE GREAT PALS. I LOVE HIM NEXT TO DAD AND AUNT VIRGINIA."

The dog, meanwhile, had stopped his racing from sheer exhaustion, and was lapping the water out of the fountain-basin. Victor whistled to him, and he bounded away to scratch frantically at the door. A moment after it had been opened to him Melissa saw him fairly leap into his master's arms, and Victor's face buried in his fluffy fur.

That day Mr. Letour was invited to behold the sight from the Mapes's window.

Melissa introduced her two friends by way of the blackboard, and they saluted each other in real military fashion. Victor thanked Mr. Letour, by means of his blackboard, for the beautiful music, and said how much good it had done him. And Mr. Letour, through Melissa and her board, pronounced Bim to be a wonderful Chow dog, and told Victor to let him out for a run often, and not keep him shut indoors too much. Then the old cobbler went back to his bench, humming happily one of his gayest tunes.

So a number of days slipped by, and another playmate was added to the two children. Bim became an active member, especially of their Indian games, and many a stray arrow from his master's bow did he chase across the lawn and bring dutifully back, wagging his feathery tail. And Melissa, though she had never so much as laid a hand on his fluffy fur, loved him almost as much as his little master did. And every night, without fail, good old

Mr. Letour's flute sang the children to sleep.

So passed a fortnight of peaceful days, and then something happened.

CHAPTER VIII

SOMETHING HAPPENS

THE middle of July had come and the children still played daily by means of their blackboards. Bim grew well acquainted with his new home and appeared to like it, especially romping around the lawn and helping to play Indians.

Victor also seemed to improve daily, despite the heat and his confinement to the house. Miss Blake said he could probably go back to Idlehours soon. When he told Melissa this, she wrote on her board:

"THAT WILL BE FINE FOR YOU,"

but into her own heart there crept a very lonely feeling.

Then came one beautiful day that she was to remember afterward for a long,

long time. A trying spell of heat was over, and the weather was cool and delightful. They played Indians all the morning, assisted by Bim. In the afternoon Victor seemed a little tired and wrote:

"PLEASE TELL ME A STORY."

So Melissa told him one of her favorite fairy-stories, printing it sentence by sentence on her board; and Bim rolled all afternoon on the lawn, chased stray butterflies, and tried to jump into the fountain. This last trick made both children laugh, for he was much too big to get into the little basin.

That night Mr. Letour played sweeter music than ever before, and Melissa dropped off to sleep, thinking she had never spent a happier day.

The next morning was rainy, but now-a-days that fact did not interfere with Victor's being at the window. Melissa was at hers first, cleaning her blackboard

and waiting for him to appear. Suddenly she raised her head and saw that he was there, and waved to him as usual.

And at once she knew, though he, too, waved, that something was different, something was wrong. He was not smiling. He was very pale. The faint rosy color that had lately come into his cheeks had all left him, and his eyes looked as if he had been crying.

"WHAT IS THE MATTER?"

questioned Melissa at once, and he answered:

"A DREADFUL THING HAS HAPPENED."

Oh, why did n't he tell her right away? Melissa felt that she could not stand the suspense.

"TELL ME, QUICK,"

she printed, waiting breathlessly for his answer. And when it came it almost took her off her feet.

"BIM IS LOST."

Just after Victor finished printing that he laid his head down on his table, and his shoulders shook. It was with sobs Melissa knew, though she could not hear them. Miss Blake leaned over him and tried to comfort him. Victor at last raised his head, wiped his eyes, and looked over at Melissa. There was no need for her to print what *she* thought. Her little face showed it plainly enough. So she only wrote one word:

"WHEN?"

Victor replied:

"THIS MORNING EARLY.
SOME ONE LEFT THE FRONT GATE
OPEN. HE SLIPPED OUT."

Melissa could not, for the life of her, think what to say to comfort him; so she asked:

"WHICH WAY DID HE GO?"

Again Victor answered:

"WE DON'T KNOW. NO ONE SAW HIM. WE ONLY MISSED HIM LATER."

Melissa was almost as heartbroken as the boy over the loss of their playmate, but she knew she must try to encourage Victor somehow; so she printed cheerfully:

"HE WILL SURELY BE FOUND."

But Victor was not to be comforted, and only replied:

"WE THINK HE WAS STOLEN."

It was a dreary, dreary day that followed. The rain poured down heavily, and the windows had to be shut. For a long while it was so dark that the children could not see the messages they tried to exchange. Toward late afternoon it cleared, and Melissa, hoping against despair, demanded:

"IS HE BACK YET?"

Victor only returned a disconsolate

"NO,"

and Miss Blake wheeled him away for the night.

Next day things were no better. Though the servants of the big house had searched the whole neighborhood, no slightest trace of the lost dog had been discovered. Victor had no heart to play at even the beloved Indian and drooped like a wilted flower. Melissa spent the whole day at her window trying to comfort him, but it was n't a particle of use.

So a week passed. One day Victor informed Melissa that his father had written and told them to put an advertisement in the papers, offering a hundred dollars as reward for the return of the lost dog. The children felt sure this would speedily bring Bim back, and spent a day or two in high hope. But nobody appeared with Bim, and gloom settled down again upon them all.

Victor grew daily whiter and thinner, and Miss Blake grew daily more worried. From seeing the big, shiny automobile oftener in the next street, Melissa knew that the doctor's visits were also growing more frequent.

The children never played games any more. At first they talked constantly about Bim and the prospect of his being found or returning to them of his own accord. Then they gradually came to say less and less about him and finally did not mention him at all. Victor also seemed to sit less frequently at the window and for shorter periods of time. Once only he spoke about his own feelings and confided to Melissa:

"I FEEL HORRID ALL OVER."

But Victor was not the only one who was suffering. Little Melissa herself had come to realize that things were very bad indeed. This was not only because she too loved Bim and missed him, but for another

reason besides. This she told no one but her mother.

"It's all *my* fault, Mother," she said one night in the darkness, after they had gone to bed, and Mr. Letour's flute was filling the air with rather mournful music, for even he found it hard to be cheerful since Bim's disappearance. To her mother's astonished question Melissa went on:

"Yes, it *is* all my fault. If I had n't ever spoken about a dog to Victor, he would n't have thought of sending for him; and then Bim would still be safe at Idlehours, and Victor would be happy and getting well." Mrs. Mapes tried hard to persuade her little daughter that she had nothing for which to blame herself, but not a thing she said could change Melissa. The child still insisted that it was her fault, and cried herself to sleep in consequence.

And the next day when Melissa went to her window there was no Victor in his

usual chair, only Miss Blake chalking something on the blackboard, which Melissa read with a sinking heart:

"VICTOR IS ILL IN BED.
HE WANTED ME TO TELL YOU.
TRY NOT TO WORRY."

CHAPTER IX

A RESOLVE AND A COMPACT

IF the days before had been dreary, they were as nothing compared with what followed for Melissa. There could be no denying it—Victor was very ill. His heart had not been strong since his accident, and now his sorrow for the loss of Bim had put him far, far back—in fact, made his recovery a thing on which no one could count.

Melissa did not know all this, but she knew a little of it. Nearly every morning Miss Blake would write on Victor's blackboard, telling how he was, and Melissa would send him cheerful messages; but sometimes the boy was too ill and Miss Blake too busy to take time even for that, and then Melissa would be very miserable indeed.

The days were very long and very lonely now that her playmate could no longer be at his window, and Melissa found time hanging very heavily on her hands. Mrs. Mapes tried hard to comfort her little daughter, but she was a very busy woman, who had to sew early and late and be out a great deal in order to keep their tiny home together. So there was little opportunity for her to do much in the way of consolation.

In these sorry days Melissa had only one comfort. She would go down-stairs and, sitting disconsolately on the other end of his bench, hold long conversations with old Mr. Letour, and the subject of these talks was ever and always of Bim. To Mr. Letour also did Melissa confide how responsible she felt for the dog's loss, and, much to her amazement, he acknowledged that he, too, felt responsible.

"Did I not tell the little chap to let that Bim run about the lawn much? Ah, that was all the trouble! If that Bim had been

more in the house he would not have had the chance to run off when nobody was looking. It is I—I that was one fool. Never should I have told the little chap that!" It comforted Melissa somewhat to know that her weight of responsibility was shared by some one else.

"But where do *you* think he can be, Mr. Letour?" she would ask for the hundredth time.

"That no man can say," the old cobbler would reply; "but I do not think that Bim is dead. No, he is a most expensive dog. If he were dead, some one would know."

"But would n't you think some one would want to get the hundred dollars for bringing him back?" marveled Melissa. "We were so sure he would be brought back right away after that was put in the papers." But Mr. Letour would shake his head.

"Ah, no! that Bim he is a very expensive dog, worth many hundred dollars. Some one knows that. They wait to see

if more will be offered. If not, they sell him, later, when all is forgotten." This was a discouraging thought. It always made Melissa feel quite hopeless when he said it. One day, however, he added a little grain of comfort:

"Maybe that Bim is not with such a person. Perhaps he is found by one who does not know, who just keeps him because he is a pretty dog. Maybe that person reads not the papers. Who can tell?" It was this thought that gave Melissa a new idea and caused her to make the resolve she now confided to the cobbler.

"I can't sit at that window up-stairs any longer," she told him. "It makes me too sad, and I 'm no use to Victor any more. I 'm going to hunt for Bim myself. Yes, I am. I 'm going out to walk in the streets all day and look everywhere. Of course I can't go very far. Mother would n't let me. But he may not have gone very far from here. Who knows? At least it will be something for me to do.

I can't sit around and do nothing any longer, and it will help me to feel I 'm making up a little for having been the cause of his getting lost." As she said this, Mr. Letour laid down the awl he was using.

"I, too, will hunt," he announced. "In the night when I have done playing the flute, I also will search for Bim. It is all we can do for that little Victor chap. I am old and I am very tired, but it will ease my mind also to search for that Bim."

Melissa's mother did not at all like the plan when she heard it. She did not like the idea of her little daughter roaming the street, and she positively forbade her even to think of such a thing as entering any house. Only when she had made Melissa promise not to go farther than five blocks in any direction from home, nor to do more than walk along, speaking to no one, did she reluctantly consent.

Melissa decided to begin the hunt the next day, but first she had a message to get to Victor. With her blackboard beside

her she waited long and patiently till she saw Miss Blake come to the window to loop back a curtain, then she wrote:

"WILL YOU PLEASE TELL VICTOR
SOMETHING FOR ME?"

Miss Blake read the message, then chalked on Victor's board:

"CERTAINLY, DEAR."

Quickly Melissa printed:

"TELL HIM I AM GOING TO HUNT
FOR BIM MYSELF.
SO IS MR. LETOUR, TOO."

Miss Blake answered:

"WAIT A MOMENT."

Melissa waited while she disappeared, well knowing that she had gone to tell the little patient. When Miss Blake returned she wrote:

"VICTOR IS DELIGHTED. HE SAYS
TO TELL YOU TO REMEMBER
BIM'S BARK."

Melissa knew very well what was meant by that. Bim had the strangest bark in the world. It was like no other dog's she had ever heard. He would begin on a sharp, high note, then three low ones like a growl, and this series he would repeat three times. But that does not describe it at all. One had to *hear* it to understand why it was so different. Once heard, one never forgot it.

Melissa went to bed that night a little happier, a wee bit comforted; and when the strains of old Mr. Letour's flute stopped at nine o'clock instead of the usual half-past, Melissa knew very well why.

CHAPTER X

AT THE BIG HOUSE

MEANTIME what was going on in the great house where a little boy lay dangerously ill? The same day that Melissa came to her new resolve brought two people to the house on Pierpont Street. One was a big, burly, anxious-faced man who hurried at once to the room where the invalid lay.

"How is Victor?" he whispered to Miss Blake, who admitted him.

"Good day, Mr. Bonner. Victor is just about the same. He is sleeping now," replied Miss Blake, laying a warning finger on her lips. The man came in on tiptoe and took a seat by the pretty brass bed where his son lay. There he sat a long, long time, gazing at the boy's sleeping face

and saying nothing. After a while he turned to the nurse.

"Is he no better?" he asked anxiously. "What seems to be the main trouble?"

"He has been just about the same for a week," answered Miss Blake. "It's his heart: but the doctors say, too, that he is worrying about something."

"Do you know what it is?" demanded Mr. Bonner.

"Oh, yes. There can be no doubt about it. He is grieving for Bim, the dog who was lost," replied Miss Blake, surprised that the man did not appear to know it.

"What? Bim not found yet?" cried Mr. Bonner. "Why, I supposed he was back long ago, especially after the reward I offered. You see, I 've been moving around from place to place in the South, and the mails have n't reached me regularly. I did n't realize that Victor was so ill until your telegram reached me, and then I hurried here at once. Why, Bim must be found if I have to hire private

detectives to do it. He certainly must be found."

"Yes, he ought to be found," agreed the nurse. "Victor's health depends on it. The doctors say that unless this worry or sorrow is removed from his mind, he can never recover. And it must be done quickly, too, if it is to be in time." Mr. Bonner got up and began to pace the floor, muttering to himself every few moments:

"Yes, yes, we must get at it at once. I never realized how fond the child was of that dog." Miss Blake watched him, and felt very sorry for him in his care and perplexity. Victor woke at last, and gave a cry of pleasure at the unexpected sight of his father.

"Why, Dad, you here? I thought you were 'way down South. Oh Dad, what are we going to do about Bim?"

"Never you fear, my boy," replied Mr. Bonner, with a heartiness he was far from feeling. "Bim 's going to be found in short order. I 'll get a detective on his

trail to-morrow morning. Oh, you 'll have Bim back inside of three days."

"Melissa 's hunting, too," remarked Victor.

"Who?" exclaimed his father.

"Melissa-Across-the-Fence," explained the boy.

"Well, of *all* the names!" cried Mr. Bonner. "That 's the queerest I ever heard. Who is the young lady, anyway?"

"She is n't a young lady. She 's a little girl who lives in the house back of our fence. I like her. We signal to each other, and—"

But at this moment there were sounds of footsteps on the stairs, the door opened, and a lady in beautiful, shimmery clothes entered.

"Aunt Virginia!" cried the boy, starting up. "How in the *world* did you get here?" And he was clasped in her arms.

"My steamer just got in, and I came straight here. How comes it my boy is n't feeling quite so well?" she questioned

cheerfully. Then came more explanations about Bim, and a renewed description of how he was lost. Victor grew very much excited as he talked, till finally Miss Blake had to ask his company to leave him for a while, because she feared it was too much for him.

That night Victor was very ill indeed, worse, in fact, than he had ever been before. The doctors came out of his room shaking their heads, and told Miss Blake to allow no one to see him, not even his own father.

Next day Mr. Bonner engaged a detective, and explained to him all he knew about the disappearance of the dog. The detective shook his head and looked doubtful when he heard how long it had been since Bim was lost. He said that it would be difficult to trace him now, because, being so valuable a dog, whoever found him had probably taken him far away from the city, or sold him to some one who had carried him off, perhaps even as far as Eu-

rope. For, declared the detective, if Bim were near by, and had ever gotten loose since, he would certainly have come back of his own accord. However, he would begin the search at once, and hope for the best; and with this cold comfort Mr. Bonner had to be content.

Three days passed, and nothing happened. The detective had not found the slightest trace of the lost dog. If the earth had opened and swallowed Bim, he could not have disappeared more completely. A larger reward was advertised in all the papers for his return or even for reliable news about him, a step that had a very strange result.

The reward was so large that it attracted a good deal of attention. Many dogs began to arrive at the house, all escorted by people in hopes of reaping the promised dollars. It was the most extraordinary collection of dogs—big dogs, little dogs, short dogs, long dogs, lean dogs, fat dogs, smooth dogs, woolly dogs,

clean dogs, dirty dogs, every kind of dog except one that resembled Bim. Of this variety there was not so much as one. It took nearly all the buttoned serving-man's time to open the door, give one look at the latest arrival, and dismiss him.

And all the while the little boy lay in his darkened room in a heavy sleep or stupor, out of which he woke only to murmur occasionally, "Has Bim come yet?" and then sink back with shut eyes, while the fever in his brain grew higher and higher.

His desperate father strode back and forth outside his door, or rushed downstairs every time the bell rang, hoping against hope that Bim had come, or that the detective had news of him. In another room sat the boy's Aunt Virginia, doing little else but answer the constantly ringing telephone. Most of these inquiries were from people who wanted a description of Bim, or thought they had seen him somewhere or had heard of some one who had.

It was a busy, anxious, sorrowful household, where none was allowed to see the little invalid save the doctors and Miss Blake, who would trust no hands but her own to lay the cool bandages on the hot, feverish head.

CHAPTER XI

THE SEARCH MELISSA MADE

MELISSA turned into a hot, ill-smelling street where the afternoon sun blazed down on both sides of the way. She had hoped that at least *one* side would be shady, but since neither was, she heaved a little sigh and began to pick her way along the crowded sidewalk, turning her head anxiously from side to side at every step.

Melissa had been searching for Bim exactly nine days. There was not a street within the radius of five blocks from her own home over which she had not traveled at least twice, and some oftener. The streets to the west and south were lined with pretty well-kept houses or large mansions like Victor's home, but those to the

north and east were mainly filled with tenements and dirty frame-houses, occupied by very poor and equally dirty foreigners.

Along the nicer streets Melissa felt it was useless to search any more. In these houses it was unlikely that Bim could be, so she turned her attention now to the poorer streets, for there she thought it more possible that the dog might be detained.

It was a very discouraging search, and a very discouraged, hot, and tired little girl who was making it. What chance, after all, had she to find a lost dog in all this muddle of dirty streets and dirtier houses, none of which she would have dared to enter even had she been allowed? In any one of the tiny backyards Bim might be chained, or he might be kept a prisoner in any one of the ill-smelling rooms. And how was she ever to know?

She had questioned many children about Bim, but they either answered her vaguely

or were rude to her; so she had given up that method. Many dogs she had seen and others she had heard barking, but there was no mistaking them for Bim.

On this particular afternoon Melissa was tempted more strongly than usual to give it all up. She was thirsty, she was tired, the hot pavements fairly blistered her feet, and the odors of the streets were most unpleasant. She wanted—oh, how she wanted!—to go home and get a drink of milk and sit by the cool window, looking over the lawn. But even while she thought of this her mind drew for her a picture of the feverish boy tossing on the bed in his darkened room, his life hanging by scarcely more than a thread, which might snap at any moment. With that picture before her she could not go back, not just yet.

She wandered another block, staring into basement windows, dark doorways, and unsavory areas. From every house came the loud voices of people talking,

laughing, or quarreling. And innumerable children swarmed on the sidewalks, playing noisy games. Suddenly into the street there turned a big hurdy-gurdy, dragged by a dark man who looked like an Italian, and accompanied by a woman with a red handkerchief about her head and a tambourine in her hand.

They halted in front of a little grocery store. The man grinding the organ struck up a lively tune, and the woman thumped her tambourine or held it up for pennies. Instantly a crowd of children gathered, and some began to dance gaily on the hot sidewalk. So prettily indeed did they trip about that Melissa stopped a moment to watch them. The organ changed to an even livelier tune, and the dancing went on harder than ever.

But suddenly Melissa's ear caught a sound not heard by the others, and her heart gave a great thump. Then she pushed her way out of the crowd and listened harder than ever. Yes, there it

was again. She could not be mistaken—the bark of a dog, protesting at the music, which dogs seldom, if ever, like. But it was not an ordinary bark. Melissa strained her ears to catch it again, while the rollicking organ tried hard to drown every sound save its own.

The third time it came Melissa knew she was not mistaken. She almost shouted aloud in her joy. It was Bim! It could be no other, that strange bark beginning on a high note and continuing in a series of low growls. It was Bim. She was certain. And he must be somewhere near. But where? The barking sounded muffled and came from a little distance. The nearest that Melissa could place it was a cellar somewhere under the dirty little grocery store.

But the cellar door was shut and locked. Melissa could not have entered it had she tried, nor did she dare even to enter the store to inquire about it. She stood uncertain while the hurdy-gurdy moved

away and the children after it. There was no more barking, and all was quiet again. Melissa began almost to doubt whether she was right. *Had* it been Bim? *Did* the sound come from that cellar? She longed to put her head down to the crack in the slanting door and call softly, "Bim! Bim!" and see if there would be an answering bark; but even this, she thought, would not be safe. Some one might see her do it and suspect something.

All at once she was struck by a happy idea. She would go home as fast as she could and consult Mr. Letour. *He* would surely be able to find a way out of the difficulty. But before she turned away she looked to see the number of the house, and fixed it firmly in her memory.

Mr. Letour was amazed to behold an excited Melissa rushing into his shop, her eyes wide, her face streaming with perspiration, her breath coming in great gasps; but when she had panted out her story, he became quite as excited as she.

"Yes, yes," he cried, dashing off his iron-rimmed spectacles and striding up and down the shop, "you have done well, little lady! You are good as one detective. You are better than old Letour, who paces the streets every night and sees no farther than his nose. Yes, you find that Bim. Of that I am sure. But how comes he in that vile cellar, that beautiful Bim, worth so many hundred dollars? We will get him out of that. Oh, yes, we will get him out and send him back to that Victor boy."

"But what are you going to do?" demanded Melissa, impatiently, "and when are you going? Can't you start right away and bring him back this afternoon? We can't get him to Victor too soon."

"No, no, one must not be too quick. Besides, I have three pairs of shoes that *must* be done before six o'clock. I have promised it. If that Bim is chained up in a cellar, there he will remain, at least till to-night. And then I must go cautiously. I must be very sure it *is* that

Bim. I cannot tramp into a house and command them to give me that dog. No, surely. But be comforted, little Melissa. To-night I will surely find out if it is that Bim; and then we shall see. I play not on the flute to-night. But do not go to bed, either you or madame your mother, till I return with news."

It was quite needless to give Melissa that last bit of advice, or her mother either. They were both so excited that they could scarcely eat a mouthful of supper, and the thought of sleep was impossible. After dark they watched from their front window, and saw Mr. Letour lock up and leave his little shop, waving hopefully to them as he trudged away down the street. After that they went to the back window, where they sat looking out at the big house faintly visible in the darkness. The fountain tinkled and splashed. A cool breeze came to them across the lawn, sweet with the scent of grass which had that day been cut. Most of the windows of the house

were lighted, and the shadow of moving figures could sometimes be seen across them. In Victor's window there was only a faint light, and on this window Melissa and her mother riveted their eyes while they talked together in whispers. Once in a while Mrs. Mapes wondered to think how she had been drawn into this strange affair, and how deeply she had become absorbed in it. And the hours dragged slowly by.

It was a long, long time before Mr. Letour returned, so long that Melissa could have cried with impatience at the delay. What could be the matter? Had it turned out not to be Bim, after all? Had the dog, perhaps, been taken away before he got there? Or had Mr. Letour failed to make the people give him up, even though it was Bim?

Again and again she put these questions to her mother, again and again they talked each separate one over and over, and it was nearly eleven o'clock when they heard

the door open down-stairs and a step sounding in the hall.

Melissa rushed to their own door, an eager question on her lips, only to be almost knocked off her feet by a hurrying form that came bounding up the stairs and into the room. Before her mother had even a chance to light the gas, Melissa was rolling on the floor, her arms around a fluffy body, and crooning:

"O, Bim! Bim! Bim! Bim!"

But it was an amazing Bim that was revealed to them when the gas was lit. He was dirty with the mud of the streets and the coal-dust of the cellar, this beautiful Bim who used to receive a bath and a combing every single day. Moreover, he was a thin and hungry-looking Bim, he for whom the best had never been too good! He had no collar, only a dirty rope twisted about his neck. Altogether he looked like a starved tramp dog, but even this could not deceive any one who had ever seen the former lordly Bim.

After him up the stairs stumped Mr. Letour, so pleased and proud and happy that he could do little else but chuckle over the returned wanderer. At last the excitement was sufficiently calmed down for him to tell his story.

With his hand on Bim's head, he told them how he had found the place and lingered about nearly two hours before he heard so much as a single sound from the cellar. At last some one had begun playing a piano, and Bim had given one whining bark. Then Mr. Letour was sure that he was right. Next he scraped the acquaintance of two little Italian boys sitting outside the grocery shop, and gradually lured them into telling how they had found a dog sometime before and had taken him home for a pet. But, they said, he was so ugly and morose that they had to keep him chained in the cellar all the time; also he ate a great deal, and their father did not like him, and they were rather tired of him themselves.

Then Mr. Letour, trying hard to conceal his eagerness, remarked that he had been wanting a dog for some time himself, and offered to buy this one for a dollar. The offer was speedily accepted, Bim was led up from the cellar on a rope, and Mr. Letour returned in triumph with the long lost Chow. All this he told them while Bim lapped up an entire quart bottle of milk and ate three lamb chops for which they had had no appetite at supper.

"And now let 's take him right around to Victor," cried Melissa, hopping about in a ferment of excitement.

"Yes, we must n't even wait till morning," agreed her mother, "if the boy is so low." And so, although it was nearly midnight, the three went round to Pierpont Street, Mr. Letour leading Bim by the rope.

It was Mr. Bonner himself who opened the door at their ring, and a very much astonished man he was at the strange group. But when he saw Bim, he uttered a cry of

Bim comes home

delight, sunk down on his knees, put his arms about the dog's neck, and actually hugged him. Then he led them all inside and made them tell the wonderful story.

"We hope the return of Bim will do your son a great deal of good," said Mrs. Mapes, who had spoken for them all. Mr. Bonner half turned away.

"I pray God that it will," he said huskily, "but it may be too late, after all. The doctors have given him up, and we do not know whether he will live through the night. He is unconscious, but if he should come to himself, we will show him the dog and see what that will do. And whether he lives or not, I shall never forget what you good people have done for my son."

So leaving Bim to be restored to his little master, the three went away into the night.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN BIM RETURNED

IT was two days later, about four in the afternoon. Melissa sat in her window, her hands clenched, her eyes fastened on the big house opposite in a fever of expectation. Near her sat her mother sewing steadily, yet at intervals glancing up with anxious eyes at the window across the lawn.

Out on the lawn lay Bim, guarded by the serving-man in buttons. He was a very clean dog now, and his fluffy coat fairly gleamed from its recent brushing and combing, but he was still thin, and had no such energy to race about the fountain as had once been his. He seemed to prefer to roll on the lawn and bask in the sun lazily.

"Oh! Mother," sighed Melissa for the twentieth time at least, "*do* you think we shall hear good news to-day? Do you think Victor will be better?"

"Dear, I hope so with all my heart," answered Mrs. Mapes, "but we must wait and be patient. I think it is a good sign that he is still alive."

There had been little change in the boy's condition since the memorable night of Bim's return. On that night, so Miss Blake had told them by blackboard next day, Victor came to himself for a few moments, and in that time, very cautiously, lest the surprise should be too much for him, they told that Bim had been found and was in the house, but they did not dare let him see the dog. Victor had seemed to understand the good news, but had straightway gone off into a stupor again, from which he had not since roused. The doctors thought, however, that there might be hope for him if he really understood that his pet was found; but until he

returned to consciousness again they could not definitely tell. So it was that Melissa was watching, with every sense intent, for the latest news of him.

Presently, as she watched, she saw a maid come to the door and beckon the buttoned serving-man. He in his turn called to Bim, who rose lazily, and all three disappeared into the house. After that a long, long while seemed to pass, and nothing happened.

Suddenly, however, Miss Blake appeared at the bay-window and began to chalk something on the blackboard. Melissa clutched at the window-sill in the intensity of her suspense. Then she cried:

"Oh Mother! Look! Look!" and together they read this message:

"VICTOR IS BETTER."

Melissa clapped her hands in her joy and excitement. Miss Blake went on:

"WE THINK HE IS GOING TO GET WELL."

Then, to their great astonishment, she continued:

"I WILL COME AND SEE YOU LATER THIS AFTERNOON."

Miss Blake came, as she had promised, that afternoon. Melissa hardly recognized her at first, for she did not wear her white uniform and cap, but was arrayed in a dainty pink dress, with a straw hat and parasol to match, and she looked prettier than ever.

She told them how Victor had come to himself at about four o'clock that afternoon; how his fever seemed almost gone, and his mind quite clear, except that he did not remember anything of the night Bim had returned, and only asked if anything had happened. Then she had broken the news to him again, very, very cautiously, and he had immediately asked to see the dog. She said that when Bim was brought in he jumped right up on the bed, and Victor put both arms about him

and buried his face in the fluffy fur, too happy for even a single word. After that the doctor had taken just one look at the boy and said, "He will recover."

But Miss Blake had something else to say to Melissa and her mother. She handed Mrs. Mapes an envelope presently and remarked:

"Mr. Bonner wished me to give this to you for him." Noticing Mrs. Mapes's surprised glance, she continued:

"In it there are two checks, each for two hundred and fifty dollars. That is the amount of the reward offered for the return of Bim. One check is for Melissa, the other for Mr. Letour. They both had a part in finding and bringing back the dog. But Mr. Bonner says that nothing can ever repay the debt of gratitude he owes you all for saving the life of his son."

It was on a beautiful morning, about two weeks later, that Victor sat up for the first time in the bay-window, dressed, and

with the blackboard before him. Bim lay at his feet, looking up at him every few moments with adoring eyes. At her own window sat Melissa, also with blackboard and chalk ready. As soon as Victor appeared, she wrote:

"IT 'S WONDERFUL, IS N'T IT?
GETTING WELL, I MEAN."

Victor replied in rather shaky letters, for his hand still shook from weakness:

"YOU BET IT IS."

Then:

"IT WAS GREAT OF YOU TO FIND BIM.
I CAN NEVER THANK YOU AND MR.
LETOUR ENOUGH."

Melissa modestly returned:

"I WOULD N'T HAVE KNOWN WHERE
HE WAS IF IT HAD N'T BEEN FOR
HIS BARK."

But Victor had something else on his mind, and announced:

"WE ARE GOING TO IDLEHOURS NEXT WEEK."

At this Melissa's face fell, and her heart went down in her boots. She tried to seem cheerful about it and replied:

"THAT WILL BE FINE FOR YOU,"

but she could not help adding:

"I SHALL MISS YOU VERY MUCH."

To her great astonishment he answered:

"NO, YOU WON'T."

Before she could deny it he added:

"BECAUSE YOU ARE COMING, TOO."

Melissa almost fell out of the window in her amazement as she read this, and Victor watched her, smiling broadly; but all she could think of replying was:

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?"

His only answer read:

"ASK YOUR MOTHER."

She turned to her mother with an astonished question, but Mrs. Mapes smilingly replied:

"Yes, dear, it is all true. Victor's Aunt Virginia has decided to go to Idlehours and make her home there for a while in order to watch over the boy. She sent word to me the other day, saying that she would always have a great deal of sewing to be done, and asking me if I would be willing to come there and do it for her. She thinks, too, that it will be nice for you, and splendid for Victor to have a playmate, because he is often a little lonely there. The reason I have not told you before is that Victor wanted to be the first to tell you himself." This news was so bewildering to Melissa that she could do nothing else but go to the window and clap her hands to show her happiness. The idea was almost too wonderful. But suddenly a thought came to her, and she wrote:

"I AM ONLY SORRY FOR ONE THING. POOR MR. LETOUR WILL BE VERY LONELY."

To this Victor instantly responded:

"NO HE WON'T.
ASK YOUR MOTHER."

And again Mrs. Mapes explained that Mr. Bonner had asked Mr. Letour to go to Idlehours and take care of his valuable horses and dogs, because the old man knew a great deal about them. So Mr. Letour was very happy, too, and would have much more time to play on his flute.

Altogether it was all glorious news for Melissa, and she was so surprised and so happy that for a long while she could hardly talk about it sensibly. All the rest of the morning she and Victor exchanged ideas about it on their blackboards, and late in the afternoon, when he sat up again for a while, they were still discussing it frantically. At last, when Miss Blake came to put Victor back to bed, he wrote:

"WE WON'T HAVE TO USE THESE AT IDLEHOURS."

and then:

"BUT WE'LL PLAY INDIANS ALL DAY LONG."

Melissa joyfully agreed, and ended:

"GOOD NIGHT, BIG CHIEF EAGLE-FEATHER."

And Victor gave her a military salute and answered:

"GOOD NIGHT, MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE."

THE END